

A Scandal in Suburbia

Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

Over the centuries crime fiction has taken many different forms, encompassing Victorian thrillers (Edgar Poe's *Murders in the Rue Morgue*), country-house cozies (Agatha Christie's Miss Marple), hard-boiled action stories (Raymond Chandler's *The Long Goodbye*), and, more recently, subtle explorations of the demons that drive psychopaths (Ruth Rendell's *Master of the Moor*, Thomas Harris's *Hannibal the Cannibal*). One might be forgiven, then, for thinking that mysteries and crime fiction appeal only to our dark side.

One would be wrong. Like the distinction between tragedy and comedy itself (think of the proverbial cream pie in the face), there is a body of mystery literature that explores the lighter side of mayhem. Some truly gifted writers have turned their hands to this task, among them Britain's Peter Lovesey (*Bertie and the Seven Bodies*, in which the Prince of Wales finds himself immersed in a country-house series of murders commencing when a fellow guest collapses into the bombe glacée), Ruth Dudley Edwards (*Ten Lords a-Leaping*, in which members of the House of Lords who oppose a ban on fox-hunting are dispatched even as they debate the issue), and Canada's own gem, Howard Engel, whose protagonist Benny Cooperman, is the very antithesis of the hard-boiled private investigator: his favourite meal is a chopped-egg sandwich on white bread, washed down with—you guessed it: a glass of milk. It is, then, possible to

square the circle, and create an entertaining look at crime. Thus, this week's slightly-belated Halloween treat: a Canadian farce proving that murder can be fun.



Linwood Barclay

Linwood Barclay is a staff columnist at the Toronto Star, where he has worked for more than twenty years. His memoir, *Last Resort: Coming of Age in Cottage Country*, was shortlisted for the 2001 Stephen Leacock Award for Humour. His first novel, *Bad Move* set the stage for his second in the series, *Bad Guys*. (As he says, “my books are critic—proof. What can they say? That they’re bad?”) Linwood and his

(presumably long-suffering) wife and two children live in Burlington, Ontario.

Bad Move

(Bantam/Dell, 2004)

Zack Walker is a science-fiction writer, working from home. He is also a chronic worrier. Living near downtown Toronto with his wife, Sarah, and their two teenage kids, he worries about his family. The neighborhood, it seems, is going downhill fast, taken over by drug-addicts and hookers, and gangs of teens terrorizing residents at night. When a little child goes missing, and is later found murdered, Zack has had enough: he bundles his family off to the suburban Valley Forest Estates in search of a better lifestyle.

Poor Zack. Little does he suspect that he has exchanged one set of vices for another. Their newly-purchased bungalow, on a treeless lot on a mostly grassless street, is plagued by builder's problems: as Sarah prepares dinner one evening a leaking shower stall on the second floor brings down bits of the kitchen ceiling into their dinner. The kids feel uprooted, and dislike their new schoolmates. Sarah is forced to commute to Toronto's core each day. Things come to a head when Zack, communing with nature on the bank of the nearby Willow Creek, discovers the body of a local environmental activist, whose head has been bashed in by the proverbial blunt instrument. When they learn that he knew the victim (as well as discovered the body), the police are inclined to regard him as a prime suspect.

With an uncanny ability to make things worse, Zack sets out to teach his wife a lesson: while grocery-shopping, he spies an unattended handbag in her shopping-

cart, and takes it. Only it isn't Sarah's bag, and when he opens it to find some ID he discovers \$20,000. Being the straight-arrow person that he is, Zack attempts to return the purse, only to find its owner dead. With his finger-prints all over her house, Zack decides that things definitely do not look good.

If he only knew. His adventures will lead Zack to encounters with a shady developer, a corrupt city councillor, a psychopath who shares Zack's interest in science-fiction, a suburban pot-farmer, a neighborhood dominatrix, and, not least, a python named Quincy.

A cautionary tale

Bad Move is a cautionary tale on several levels: it reminds us that things are not always what they seem, that the grass is not necessarily greener, and that, in attempting to teach others the folly of their ways, we ought to tread very carefully indeed. Most importantly, it is a rollicking, fun-filled poke at suburban life, reminiscent of the madcap comedy films of the 30's and 40's. Buy it. Read it. Laugh. You'll live longer.

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